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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S KURDS RELIEVED BY OUTCOME OF PM ERDOGAN'S
WHITE HOUSE MEETING

REF: ANKARA 2717

Classified By: Adana PO Eric Green for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Our contacts in southeast Turkey have all reacted positively to PM Erdogan's Oval Office meeting, noting that the chance of a cross-border land attack by Turkish forces has diminished significantly, though many still expect air strikes against PKK targets in the Qandil mountains. Our contacts also welcomed Erdogan's comments that the terrorist Kurdistan Workers, Party (PKK) -- and not the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) -- is Turkey's target and credited the U.S. for moderating the GOT's posture. While contacts see the immediate risk of large-scale conflict as having abated, no one in the Southeast believes the GOT is shifting its overall approach to the Kurdish issue, as the initial fallout from the hostage crisis suggests. End summary.

¶2. (C) On November 6, Consulate Adana staff talked by phone with contacts in Diyarbakir, Sirnak, Mardin and Cizre (near the Iraqi border) to elicit reactions to PM Erdogan's U.S. visit and its implications for next steps against the PKK.

CBO Unlikely, Air-Strikes Expected

¶3. (C) Yilmaz Akinci, a Diyarbakir-based free-lance journalist who works regularly with NPR and the WSJ, said the tension has relaxed dramatically in the last several days. He said the Istanbul ministerial, the hostage release and the White House meeting each cut about 20 percent of the tension, which is now only about 40 percent above normal. He said the White House meeting struck a good middle course for Turks and Kurds: the President declared the PKK as an enemy and did not veto a CBO outright. At the same time, PM Erdogan's language clearly sought to dispel fears that the GOT would target the KRG as well as the PKK.

¶4. (C) Halil Balkan, President of Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Sirnak, said people in the region are extremely pleased with the meeting because it signals that land operations are unlikely and that the U.S. will participate in the mechanism to be established between Turkey and Iraq on the PKK. He added that limited spot operations could be launched against the PKK's hideouts in the Qandil Mountains but that this is something that has been taking place anyway. He noted that locals feared a land operation would jeopardize the gains in Northern Iraq and cause more unrest in Turkey.

¶5. (C) Adnan Elci, President of Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Cizre, credited Erdogan for pursuing a constructive policy in the region. He said the U.S. visit helped Erdogan avoid the "trap" of a land operation that had been set by domestic opponents seeking to bring the PM's party down a few notches following its success in the July elections. He also noted that, despite warnings by the GOT about economic sanctions against Northern Iraq, traffic through the Habur border crossing is proceeding normally, with up to 1000 trucks/day going in each direction.

¶6. (C) Another businessman, Bedrettin Karaboga, who lives in

Mardin and sells pasta and other food to Northern Iraq, noted that local businessmen have been increasingly outspoken on both the need for the PKK to give up its armed struggle and for the GOT to explore political and economic solutions to the Kurdish issue. He noted that at a recent trade fair in Diyarbakir, about 350 visiting Iraqi businessmen all voiced strong opposition to a CBO. He agreed that the prospects for a land operation have diminished, but that air strikes in the mountains are possible "to defuse the Turkish people's anger." Karaboga added that he believed the energetic American diplomacy is evidence that the United States is not going to disregard Northern Iraq or Southeast Turkey.

¶17. (C) Ahmet Ertak, the Democratic Society Party (DTP) Mayor of Sirnak, agreed that a land incursion is now highly unlikely and said he hoped the diplomatic push by the U.S. serves as the precursor for new efforts to adopt a more ambitious approach to promoting a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue. He said, "Some of the problems Iraqi Kurds went through in Iraq (under Saddam) are being experienced by Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Syria. The United States should handle and solve this issue within its Middle East policy."

Same Old "Us vs Them" Kurdish Policy

¶18. (C) While our contacts were uniformly relieved that a large-scale CBO targeting the KRG now appears unlikely, they expressed disappointment that the GOT shows little sign of moderating its muscular approach to the Kurdish question. They are disappointed that the GOT is attacking the DTP MPs who participated in the return of the Turkish soldiers who had been held hostage by the PKK (ref). Akinci said that statements by government and DTP officials suggest the two sides may be on a collision course that will result in closure of the party. Such an outcome, he said, would alienate the millions of DTP voters in the southeast and further polarize Turkish society.

Comment

¶19. (C) The biggest fear among Kurds in Turkey's southeast was that the GOT would use the PKK as a pretext to launch wide-scale military operations against the KRG. This would threaten the gains achieved by Kurds in Iraq and provoke instability on the Turkish side of the border as well. Though few locals will welcome air strikes against the PKK, most accept that the GOT must do something, even if it is symbolic, in order to placate public opinion.

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